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Ideological uncertainty and the path of convergence: the impact of the 1970s in France and the U.K.

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the fracturing of certainties that began in the 1970s, at the end of the period described as ‘les trente glorieuses’ in France, but a period that was also, to a more modest extent, a period of economic expansionism and intellectual optimism in the U.K. At the level of political discourse and policy options, the economic crisis of the late 1970s prepared the ground for a marked divergence between France and the U.K.: on the one hand, the ‘socialisme aux couleurs de la France’ that was to characterize the ambition of the socialist years under François Mitterrand, and on the other, a return to the corner-shop capitalism of thrift and endeavour that was at the heart of Margaret Thatcher’s remedy for the U.K.’s ills. Looked at, however, from the perspective offered by theories of convergence, underlying that manifest divergence was a deeper gravitational pull to the same path as both countries endured the loss of old ideological certainties and grappled, as we shall argue, with a new ideology that is no less powerful and ubiquitous for refusing to declare itself as such.

KEYWORDS: France, U.K., society, ideology, convergence

Introduction

In a period increasingly concerned with the preservation, appropriation and reinterpretation of memory, it is understandable that 2014, as the hundredth anniversary of the start of World War I, should have been, and continue to be, the focus of so much critical attention. For the choices currently being made by the elites in France and the U.K., however, one could argue that 2015 offers a host of pertinent commemorative resonances: 70 years since the end of World War II, 40 years since Margaret Thatcher defeated Edward Heath to become leader of the Conservative party in the U.K., 20 years since the end of François Mitterrand’s second mandate as the first socialist president of the French Fifth Republic, and ten years since the French electorate shook the foundations of the European project by voting by a clear majority against a draft constitution for the European Union in a national referendum. All of the foregoing events are linked in one way or another with the attempt to create a sense of stability and certainty in the management of the free world’s affairs, and the unravelling of that ambition that was given a dramatic impetus in the 1970s.

Until the 1970s, the ‘trente glorieuses’ in France and mainstream politics in the U.K. were underpinned by the stabilising influence of the agreement reached by 44 Allied nations at Bretton Woods in New Hampshire in July 1944. Mindful of the failures of the Versailles Treaty, such as the competitive devaluation of currencies that followed among the signatories to that

peace, for the first time there would be a properly negotiated post-war monetary order. The rules, regulations and procedures for this new system would necessitate the creation of an International Monetary Fund that could help bridge temporary imbalances of payments between the states that were signatories to the agreement, and the proper functioning of the system would be further underwritten by the resources of what would later be called the World Bank.

By the very beginning of the 1970s, however, the Bretton Woods system began to unravel and consequently the certainties that characterised it. Unlike the immediate post-war period, when the United States held over half the world's gold reserves and could function as the anchor currency of the monetary system that was convertible to gold, by the 1970s this was no longer the case. The Bretton Woods system already allowed countries to forego converting dollars to gold and simply hold dollars instead. But by the 1960s, the increasing prosperity and competitiveness of countries and regions like Japan and Europe, meant that they had the benefits of under-valued currencies in world markets while the United States endured the drawbacks of a rigidly over-valued currency, and could only sustain growth at home and maintain commitments overseas by printing dollars. The 'Nixon shock', administered in August 1971 by President Richard Nixon, in the face of a negative U.S. balance of payments and increasing public debt, resulted from his decision to uncouple the dollar from gold and allow it to float downwards.¹ A new era of floating currencies had begun.

The shock to the world system of Nixon's decision was amplified by the failure to appreciate fully the geo-political change that would precipitate directly the end of 'les trente glorieuses'. The successful Anglo-American plan to unseat the democratically elected Iranian leader, Muhammad Mossadegh, in 1953, and replace him with a more pliable regime, had illustrated the way an old Western colonial power and a new economically neo-colonial power continued to assume the prerogative of controlling the developed world's most important resource: oil. (Gasiorowski and Byrne 2004). The creation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960 represented a collective act of sovereignty by a group of oil exporting nations and a turning point in the control of these states over their natural resources (Yergin 1991). The true significance of that turning point, however, would emerge when the economic effect of the Nixon shock combined with the foreign policy effect of a military conflict in the Middle East to produce a perfect storm.

Ending the convertibility of the dollar to gold and allowing the currency to devalue might enhance the competitiveness of the US economy, but it was also going to reduce the income of the petroleum producing countries of OPEC, since crude oil was priced in dollars. The full economic implication of this would become evident in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. The surprise attack on Israel by Syria and Egypt in October 1973, to regain the territory lost in the 6-day war in 1967, prompted the US to provide Israel with weapons and other vital supplies. The Arab members of OPEC responded punitively with an oil embargo against the US, and a number of other Western states which, although it ended in the spring of 1974, marked the beginning of a process that would see a quadrupling of oil prices by the middle of the decade. Full employment and the expectation of growth that had prompted the investment in social goods, even in the US, would give way to the new combination of low growth and high inflation called 'stagflation'. This crisis, it could be argued, dealt a fatal blow to the intellectual self-confidence of states that had hitherto believed in their vocation to guide and even intervene in the operation of their market economies, leading to an abdication of responsibility that some three decades later would prompt the worst financial collapse since the Wall Street Crash of 1929 (Elliott and Atkinson 2008).

The shifting certainties of the right

In France, the oil crisis of 1974 also coincided with a change of regime. De Gaulle had quit the political stage after the result of the ill-fated referendum in the spring of 1969 that went against his proposed reforms to the regions and the Senate, but the political settlement of the Fifth Republic remained profoundly shaped by the interplay of the personal and the institutional that had characterised his presidency (Gaffney 2012). As de Gaulle's prime minister during the May '68 crisis, Pompidou had appeared to many as the one who had steadied the ship of state and demonstrated the flexibility with regard to the demands of students and workers that had pulled France back from the brink of chaos. Pompidou's bid for the presidency was endorsed by a comfortable majority of the French electorate, yet it was not long before he reverted to a familiar conservatism. His prime minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, had announced in the National Assembly in September 1969, a commitment to a 'New Society' that carried forward some of the spirit of May '68, notably the ambition to establish structures for greater partnership between management and labour and the pursuit of greater equity through profit-sharing. It was meant to identify a path to overcoming the ritualised hostilities between capital and labour that were a key marker in the perception of France as a 'société bloquée' (Crozier 1971). Resentment stirred in parts of the presidential Gaullist majority in the face of Chaban-Delmas' idealistic pursuit of change and in 1972 Pompidou replaced him with the more obviously conservative figure of Pierre Messmer.

Outside of the institutions of the Republic and in the wider polity, there was a longer and underlying cycle of change, of which the demands of May '68 could be viewed as the most dramatic, brief and partial expression. For some observers, France's evolution towards a post-industrial future was well underway (Touraine 1969), and the fixed attitudes largely shaped by its rural and provincial traditions were rapidly being shed as part of a broader social revolution (Mendras 1988). The perception that a sense of this change had finally percolated upwards in institutional terms came with the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to the presidency. In spite of having served as Finance Minister under both de Gaulle and Pompidou, and the support his group in the Assembly, the Independent Republicans, had given the Gaullist administration, Giscard d'Estaing was very much the embodiment of the spirit of the post-Gaullist era. While intellectually patrician he was nonetheless relaxed in manner, a relatively youthful presidential candidate at 48 and one who spoke to the concerns of the young.

When the final result of the election was declared on 19 May 1974, it looked, on the one hand, like a return to vigorous left-right politics, with a revived Socialist challenge personified by François Mitterrand resulting in a 49.2 per cent share of the vote against 50.8 per cent for Giscard d'Estaing. But a close analysis of the Mitterrand campaign shows that it was ideologically 'anodyne' (Cole 1994, 30), led by a candidate who did not feel bound by party manifestoes in his pursuit of the ultimate prize and who had mounted his bid on the back of networks of support. Giscard d'Estaing's 'liberalism' marked a corresponding departure from the traditional ideology of the right, focusing on the liberation of the individual from the oppressive weight of social conventions and moral norms. Thus by the end of 1974 abortion would be legalised, the age of majority would be reduced to eighteen and freedom of expression would be enhanced by a loosening of state control over the radio and television network ORTF.

In the same year that Giscard d'Estaing was elected, F.A. Hayek won the Nobel Prize for economics. While the reforms under Giscard d'Estaing articulated an individualism predicated on the right to define oneself in opposition to conventional, collective mores, Hayek's prize signalled the return of a conception of individual agency that appeared to have been defeated by the welfarist and collectivist consensus that had triumphed during the post-war years among

developed nations. In the U.K., the Conservatives had preserved the great welfare reforms of their Labour predecessors and continued to invest in the industries nationalised by them. This was the common ground where the social democracy of the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell and the 'one-nation' philosophy of the Tory thinker R.A. Butler, met to form the consensus nicknamed 'Butskellism' and that the soon to be elected Conservative leader, Margaret Thatcher, would be determined to break, in order to rescue the country from what she saw as the impasse which led the U.K. in the 1970s to be commonly characterised as 'the sick man of Europe' (Jacques 1983).

Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* had swept to success in the Anglo-Saxon world in the early 1970s, but had first been published in 1944 and been largely ignored by the Conservative party in the post-war years, where the dominant perception was the need to reform and move towards an electorate that was drawn by the collectivising vision of the centre-left. Whether Thatcher had actually read Hayek before becoming leader of her party was a moot point conceded by her intellectual mentor, Alfred Sherman (Young 1989, 22), but his key economic principle enabled her to wrap a language of experience around a doctrine that expressed itself in moral imperatives and common sense prescriptions about individual self-reliance and living within one's means. This vulgarisation of economic theory and its translation into a populist idiom that was exceptionally performative in the socio-economic context of the late 1970s, was what would be loosely termed Thatcherite ideology, and at the heart of it was Hayek's conviction that one cannot have a collectivist vision without fundamentally undermining freedom:

The various kinds of collectivism, communism, fascism, etc., differ between themselves in the nature of the goal towards which they want to direct the efforts of society. But they all differ from liberalism and individualism in wanting to organise the whole of society and all its resources for this unitary end, and in refusing to recognise autonomous spheres in which the ends of the individuals are supreme. In short, they are totalitarian in the true sense...(Hayek 1976, 42).

Two years later, Milton Friedman won the Nobel Prize for Economics. The enlightened Keynesian consensus that had dominated post-war politics, on both sides of the Atlantic until the 1970s, was called profoundly into question. The largely untroubled narrative that held that the state could intervene, and with increasing social benefits for everyone, in the operation of the voluntary exchange that is at the root of society, was turned on its head:

A society's values, its culture, its social conventions – all these develop in the same way, through voluntary exchange, spontaneous cooperation, the evolution of a complex structure through trial and error, acceptance and rejection. These...developed without anyone's "planning" them that way...(Friedman 1979, 26).

The vigour that these exchanges gave to society could only be restored if the notion of the individual, acting in pursuit of his or her own interest, could be restored:

Self-interest is not myopic selfishness. It is whatever it is that interests the participants [in the voluntary exchange], whatever they value, whatever goals they pursue. The scientist seeking to advance the frontiers of his discipline, the missionary seeking to convert infidels to the true faith, the philanthropist seeking to bring comfort to the needy – all are pursuing their interests, as they see them, as they judge them by their own values (Friedman 1979, 26).

The shifting certainties of the left

In the U.K., the disciples of Hayek and Friedman were pushing at an open door before Mrs Thatcher came to power. The infamous 1976 sterling crisis had forced Chancellor Denis Healey to turn back from Heathrow for fear of what would happen to the nation's currency on international markets in his absence. The climax to the debacle came with the despatch of monitors from the IMF to the Treasury, to ensure that the U.K. abided by the conditions it had imposed, i.e. spending cuts, in the terms for its loans to bail out the British economy. More significantly in intellectual terms, Prime Minister James Callaghan's speech to the Labour party conference that autumn, announced the death of the welfare socialism that had been theorised by the towering figures lionised by the British left for over half a century, such as the Webbs, Tawney, Beveridge, Crossman and Crosland. The left, Callaghan declared, had been living on borrowed time. The cosy world in which growth and full employment could be guaranteed by government spending had gone (Callaghan 1987).

Hayek and Friedman did not have the impact in France that they had in the Anglo-Saxon world, but then they did not need to in order to undermine the ideological certainties of the French left. To be an intellectual in France meant being 'oppositional', and being oppositional usually meant being of the left, shaped by the pervasive influence of Marxist theory. The façade of the monolithic example of anti-capitalism that was the Soviet Union became fissured in the early 1970s with the focus in Western media on Russian dissidents, notably Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, which helped inspire the 'mouvement antitotalitaire' in France led by intellectuals like Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis (Winock 1997). Nonetheless, for most of the post-war years the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) was the bedrock sustaining the influence of Marxist thought and it remained so. The *Institut Maurice Thorez* (IMT) and the *Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Marxistes* (CERM) were the hothouses that nurtured generations of historians and social scientists who would exercise their influence within the party and well beyond. But by the mid-1970s many of these intellectuals were beginning to doubt the viability of their vocation within the PCF. The reaction of the PCF leader, Georges Marchais, to suggestions from intellectuals within the party that it should develop broader and more pluralist horizons by, for example, foregoing its obedience to Moscow and contemplating the Eurocommunist path being taken by its sister party in Italy, was to diminish the standing of the party's intellectuals and isolate them. Ultimately, it was Jean Elleinstein at CERM who would open the breach in the dam leading to an outflow of intellectuals from the party. In articles appearing in *Le Monde* from 13-15 April 1978, he questioned the PCF leadership's refusal to publish the research done by CERM on the modern state and asked the damning question: what does Lenin have to offer to the property-owning workers of the Paris region? (Raymond 2005, 159). Conversely, the *Parti socialiste* (PS) under François Mitterrand had understood only too well that strategy mattered more than ideology. The Socialists had used the Common Programme for government signed with the PCF to position themselves as the party most able to respond to the lifestyle aspirations of the workers, and by the time the Common Programme collapsed in 1977 sufficient inroads had been made into the PCF constituency for Mitterrand to go into the next presidential campaign with the support of 44 per cent of manual workers, as opposed to the 24 per cent who would be supporting Marchais (Le Gall 1981). The binary political model of left vs right that had defined French politics for two centuries had begun to crumble in an irreversible manner (Perrineau 2015).

Jean-François Lyotard broke free from the influence of revolutionary Marxism from the early 1970s, and began to articulate a critique that profoundly undermined its certainties, or the certainties of any kind of totalizing vision that is a defining characteristic of ideology (Baechler 1976). While the Marxist narrative might have had a coherence in itself, it negated the depth

and reality of our existence by trying to force it to fit the contours of its mental discursiveness. The totalising claims of any grand narrative were without legitimacy because they derived from specific contexts. So, for example, the liberating 'truth' claims of the Enlightenment project could subsequently lead to results that were the opposite of the proclaimed objectives of their original authors. Consequently, 'Dans la société et la culture contemporaine...le grand récit a perdu sa crédibilité' (Lyotard 1979, 63). So, instead of the unifying and transcendent metanarrative, we could look for self-realisation from more narrowly focused, little narratives that, one could argue, in political terms, were going to have considerable resonance in the following decades, with the emergence of micro-politics, attuned to the heterogeneity of society, forms of engagement characterised by an emphasis on the local, the provisional, the pragmatic, and where judgements were not fixed in advance.

If one looks at what is going on, on either side of the Channel, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, one might, understandably, conclude that there were antithetical attempts to conjure ideologically-driven solutions to the crisis of the 1970s. On one side, the Thatcherite revolution, on the other, according to one of the famous slogans of the new decade, the pursuit of 'le socialisme aux couleurs de la France', as François Mitterrand conquered the nation in 1981, after having conquered the French left during the preceding decade. But looked at more closely, one could ask whether these undoubtedly important changes were genuinely ideological, whether they had any formal coherence or consistency, or whether they were even all that fundamentally distinct from each other.

If Lyotard undermined the justification for the sweeping ambition of Marxist or other ideological narratives that envisage changing the human condition, someone like Baudrillard undermined the scope for depth, and one could argue, ultimately difference. Emerging out of the 1970s and into the new decade of promise that would be conjured up by multi-channel television, satellite broadcasting and 24-hour rolling news, Baudrillard questioned not only whether grand narratives could relate to any kind of reality, he questioned whether there could be any reality at all, outside of what was purported to be such by the new communication technologies. Meaning was not anchored in any substantive reality, everything was but a play of surfaces, and shifting ones at that because there was no stabilising depth. Arguing that there was no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept, Baudrillard drew the conclusion that the revolution of postmodernity amounted to 'l'immense processus de destruction du sens, égale à la destruction antérieure des apparences' (Baudrillard, 1981, 229). Notwithstanding the tenor of a discourse which Baudrillard himself qualifies as nihilistic, the notion of social and political actors operating in a vacuum where image and reality no longer cohere, is not without justification.

Filling the ideological void

As Mrs Thatcher's most perceptive biographer observed: 'No British leader had ever been in power for so long and left so little in the depository of the English language' (Young 1989, 428). Her impact did not come from the eloquence of her discourse, but from the soundbites and well-turned phrases written for her, the perfectly timed put-down, and above all the work of the image-makers to whom she willingly submitted. Thatcher's decision to ditch the socially stereotyped hats, soften her hairstyle and deepen her voice, was eclipsed by a French president who seemed capable of metamorphosing into a variety of heroic figures, projecting an image to suit the circumstances he faced (Nay 1988). The enduringly potent symbolism of Mitterrand's red scarf and black broad-brimmed hat was indicative of the way the act of political delegation had been reversed. While in appearance he had been given the mandate to represent the socialist movement, in reality the accretion of symbolic power by him suggested

that the movement would not exist were it not incarnated by him. The images of the scarf and the hat, or the immaculate blonde hair and the hand-bag, encoded a political fetishism expressing the notion that these leaders 'owe to themselves alone an existence that social agents have given to them' (Bourdieu 1991, 205). The fervent belief in Mrs Thatcher and her conviction politics as the salvation of British conservatism, like the 'Mitterrandolâtrie' in France that had become the focus of socialist expectations, fastened far more on the mysterious objective properties of the person than the viability of their ideas, the power that seems to be its own source, in other words, their 'charisma'. Whether perceived as 'le sphinx' or 'Boadicea', at the height of their charismatic potency, there was a widespread disinclination to look beyond these politically fetishized images.

At the beginning of her time in power, Mrs Thatcher was driven to deploy her symbolic power by the conviction, confided to the head of the civil service, Robert Armstrong, that 'they are all against me' (Moore 2013, 521). The 'they' in question were the men in grey (the Conservative party grandees) and the men in black (the civil service grandees). François Mitterrand, however, deployed his symbolic power to undo the ideological constraints of his own past. His visit to the Pantheon, rose in hand, on 21 May 1981, crossed the threshold into a quasi-religious mythical dimension, during which he seemed to assume the mantle of hero of the left from Jean Jaurès and received the approbation due to a republican monarch from a nationwide television audience. As even a notable socialist observer recorded, Mitterrand slipped into the institutional mould that he had been so vehement in condemning at its inception, 'avec délectation' (Joxe 2006, 91). The potency of those images have led others to suggest that Mitterrand had succeeded in his desire to 'out-king' all of his predecessors (Gaffney 2012, 139). Mitterrand's personalisation of socialism and his exploitation of his symbolic capital was never more skilful than when he appeared most vulnerable politically. The defeat of the left in the legislative elections of 1986 should have asserted the ascendancy of the Assembly vis-à-vis the personalized rule of a president whose majority had been rebuffed by the electorate. But Mitterrand comprehensively outmanoeuvred his Gaullist prime minister, Jacques Chirac, by casting himself as the defender of the Gaullist constitution. Mitterrand used his limited prerogatives where he could to hinder government initiatives and while his actions were of limited concrete significance, they succeeded in making Chirac appear worthy of his nickname as 'le bulldozer', and a partisan one at that, while Mitterrand appeared as the impartial guardian of the Republic's eternal interests. As Michel Winock has observed, 'le symbole, pour Mitterrand, compte souvent plus que l'efficacité' (2015, 271).

In spite of their ostensibly ideological antipathies, Mitterrand and Thatcher were caught in powerful socio-economic currents that resulted in the most rapid period of convergence between economically developed countries since the period 1870-1913 (Taylor 1996). What the U.K., France and other developed democracies illustrate is that as those societies grow richer, they develop similar economic, political and social structures, and to a notable extent, common values and beliefs (Wilensky 2002). Successive technological revolutions from the electro-mechanical, through the electronic, to the digital, have changed the nature of the race for competitive advantage between nations. In countries like the U.K. and France, where traditional manufacturing accounts for barely more than a tenth of national wealth-creation and even cutting-edge technology is internationally sourced, the pursuit of competitive advantage takes new forms, such as national targets for the roll-out of internet broadband access, or the use of digital technologies in schools. When progress is no longer measured by crude criteria like the ownership of domestic appliances or cars, a significant impetus is given to the emergence of new variables such as the pursuit of equality for minorities, the drive for mass access to higher education and social mobility, and these variables pull advanced societies in the direction of converging tendencies.

Our use of the notion of convergence draws on the familiar opposition between sociology and political science regarding the factors that drive social change in advanced societies and the importance of political action in shaping that change. For some observers, the logic of industrialism meant that technological imperatives undermined the notable sources of national difference (Kerr 1960). As a result of this, advanced societies undergo a process of convergence that is both economic and social. In short, what distinguishes nations from each other is not apparent differences in political ideology but their ability, in organisational and human terms, to confront the challenge of change. Unsurprisingly, from a political science perspective, the 'end of ideology' thesis is not convincing because politics do matter. Social change can be shaped by the operation of ideologically partisan politics, for example, in the field of welfare (Stephens 1979), and the politics of class can function as a critical variable in determining how opportunities are structured in society (Korpi 1983). We would argue that political actors and ideological convictions can have an undeniable impact, especially in the short term. There is no doubt that Mrs Thatcher unleashed an appetite for change that had been frustrated by the perceived immobilism of previous governments. Similarly, it was not difficult to discern the echo of the Popular Front in 1936 when François Mitterrand came to power, unleashing a yearning for self-expression that seemed to have been suffocated in the depressed 'fin de règne' of the Giscard d'Estaing presidency. In the medium term, however, the continuing effectiveness in advanced societies of partisan politics as an instrument of social change is, we would argue, contestable.

The rapid transformation of countries like France and the U.K. since the end of World War II has been accompanied by a change that has been accelerating since the 1960s (in spite of some notable variations), of mass disaffection vis-à-vis mainstream political parties and their ideologies (Lijphart 1984). Arend Lijphart's well-known model allows for the combination of a number of variables in assessing the relationship between governance and society in advanced democracies. More specifically, the clustering of variables in what he calls the 'executives-parties dimension' accommodates what has been perceived traditionally as a defining distinction between France and the U.K. Whereas the head of the executive in the U.K. is defined as *primus inter pares* ('first among equals'), in France, under the constitution of the Fifth Republic, the twin-headed executive has in reality been heavily weighted in favour of the President, allowing him to become a kind of republican monarch, with the ensuing consequences for the public perception of the exercise of power. And yet one could argue that with the diminishing prospects for any party of securing a majority of votes cast in U.K. general elections, and a break-up of the traditional party formations lying either side of the left-right divide in France, Lijphart is justified in his more recent comparative study of democracies (1999) in pointing out the unwarranted persistence of majoritarian assumptions in many analyses of the way they function. One could suggest that the recent experience of coalition government in the U.K. and three periods of 'cohabitation' in France since 1986 between presidents and governments of opposing ideologies, illustrate the way that what were once perceived as distinctly different, even divergent systems of power, have had to make comparable adjustments led by common changes in their societies. The hard and fast nature of adversarial politics in majoritarian systems has had to evolve towards a more flexible and consensual mode of operation, in order to secure the support of increasingly sophisticated electorates who appear to have espoused pluralism and consensus more readily than their governing elites.

The trend identified by Lijphart has been reinforced in countries like the U.K. and France with winner-takes-all systems for parliamentary elections. The result has been the emergence of the classic symptoms of voter 'dealignment': the decline in party identification, voter turn-out and adults prepared to engage in party political campaigning (Dalton, Flanagan & Beck 1984). This

‘dealignment’ has contributed to a weakening of the capacity to govern and an erosion of conventional, programme-based political legitimacy. Where the biggest differences occur between affluent democracies lies in the way public opinion can be channelled and mass political behaviour shaped. The dynamic for this lies in mobilizing structures such as political parties, interest groups and increasingly the media, and in this respect also, Mitterrand and Thatcher enjoyed an important common advantage. While Mrs Thatcher was able to incite and rely on an aggressive tabloid press to demonise trade union resistance to monetarist austerity in the early 1980s, reaching a crescendo at the time of the miner’s strike in 1984, Mitterrand was able to effect a u-turn in economic policy and preside over a resort to an austerity policy that was cobbled together in March 1983 and that would subsequently be dubbed ‘la ceinture rose’ (Favier & Martin-Roland 1990, 485). In his case, Mitterrand was able to depend on the complicity of the most effective platform for the projection of his image. It was at this time that television became the principal source of information for voters in France (Vedel 2007), and Mitterrand’s mastery of this medium was often demonstrated by the tacitly demure collusion between him and his privileged interlocutors, such as the journalist Anne Sinclair.

The 1970s had prepared the terrain on which Thatcher and Mitterrand would find themselves as leaders of national states that were criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors, rendering the ideological orthodoxies behind political action increasingly superfluous. The emergence of global economic forces was compressing the space for political action and forcing national players to decode new interdependencies, which the two leaders, in their different ways, were slow to do. Thus Mrs Thatcher, while proclaiming the importance of transnational market forces, was reluctant to accept the interdependency of European states. Whereas Mitterrand, while promoting the interdependency of European states, endeavoured to protect the sovereign social vocation of the French Republic. Domestically, neither leader was able to pursue successfully the revolutions they hoped to bring about. At the time, there appeared to be no more striking contrast than the Prime Minister determined to diminish state ownership and welfare dependency in the U.K., and the President determined to socialise the means of production in France and reinvigorate the potential for manufacturing jobs in France. Thus as the Conservatives under Thatcher oversaw the sometimes brutal restructuring and privatisation of state-owned industries, her critics pointed to the Socialists under Mitterrand in France and the massive state investments they were making. In October 1981, barely six months after coming to power, the Socialists presented plans to the National Assembly that would leave 95 per cent of credit under state control due to bank nationalisations. In the industrial sector, almost all steel-making, all aluminium production, industrial chemicals, much of electrical engineering, pharmaceuticals, half of glass manufacturing and the information technology industry would come under direct state control. As the Left confidently proclaimed, it was the only remedy for the ‘insuffisances d’un capitalisme français, archaïque et vieillissant’ (Favier and Martin-Roland 1990, 131). But by the time of the first ‘cohabitation’ between Mitterrand and a centre-right government led by Jacques Chirac, during 1986-88, the process of privatisation was underway, and would continue inexorably under the ‘gauche plurielle’ government led by Lionel Jospin between 1997-2002.

Notwithstanding their divergent, ideologically-driven solutions to the industrial under-performance of their respective countries, those economies themselves were converging towards the same balance (or, arguably, imbalance) in terms of their production. By 2014 the share of U.K. gross domestic product attributable to services had reached 79 per cent, and the share of the service sector in France’s GDP was exactly the same figure (Banks et al. 2014, 11). As for Mrs Thatcher’s much vaunted ambition to effect a revolution with regard to welfare dependency, there was a brief period during the mid-1980s when welfare spending declined as a proportion of GDP. But this was due to the economic boom engineered by her then Chancellor,

Nigel Lawson. In reality, the longer term trend showed that welfare spending continued on its upward trajectory during Mrs Thatcher's period in office and by 1991 accounted for almost a quarter of GDP (Walsh, Stephens & Moore 2000, 105). Meanwhile, the assumptions of globalism were becoming rooted and ubiquitous, operating like a new totalizing vision. As one commentator has provocatively suggested, this development could be viewed as the reconciliation of economic liberalism and Marxism: the rebirth of Marxism as a management ideology (Beck 1997). It is a high politics that presents itself as completely non-political, an ideology that is not.

Conclusion: the ideology that is not

It may be argued that the blurring of the old ideological cleavages and their constituencies should not be perceived as evidence of political decline but as opening a horizon for imaginative thinking. Uncertainty is not simply an unwelcome by-product of contemporary politics but the condition of its existence (Rodgers 2011). However, while uncertainty may be the very condition for a new politics (even assuming there are the political and social actors capable of articulating it convincingly), one questions what its prospects would be confronted with a world view characterised by absolute certainty. From a globalist perspective, economic realities are as they are and attempts to conceptualise them as otherwise are futile. But the descriptivist contention that what appears in the globalist vision are pre-existing realities which determine our scope for action, can be challenged by the anti-descriptivist contention that the naming of realities amounts to the very act of their constitution, thus making their descriptive features unstable and opening the door to hegemonic restatements and redefinitions (Žižek 1989). In other words, globalism is a form of determinism in which economic realities encompass everything else, eclipsing the possibilities of political action that might challenge it.

The resulting and widely felt sense of disempowerment engendered by the domination of the economically liberal world view have led some to regard it as an ideology of material compulsion (Beck 1997). For others, the way this world view has purveyed itself as the pragmatic antidote to the old ideologies that once offered humanity a secular salvation, has conjured up a quasi-apocalyptic prospect:

The liberal critique of the 'tyranny of the Good' comes at a price: the more its program permeates society, the more it turns into its opposite. The claim to want nothing but the lesser evil, once asserted as the principle of the new global order, gradually replicates the very features of the enemy it claims to be fighting against. The global liberal order clearly presents itself as the best of all possible worlds; its modest rejection of utopias ends with the imposition of its own market-liberal utopia which will supposedly become reality when we subject ourselves fully to the mechanisms of the market and universal human rights. Behind all this lurks the ultimate totalitarian nightmare, the vision of a New Man who has left behind all the old ideological baggage (Žižek 2011, 38).²

The 1970s initiated or accelerated changes that shifted the ideological ground beneath François Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher, after they had seized their respective party vehicles in the pursuit of power during that decade. Mitterrand's critics were later to accuse him of having exploited the ideological demise of the left and the decline of France for his own purposes. But both critics and admirers could agree that crucial to his success was his 'puissance de séduction' (Winock 2015, 382), notably through the deployment of the exceptional cultural capital and its concomitant symbolic power which gave him his sphinx-like imperturbability. In her own very different way, those who worked with her could attest to Mrs Thatcher's ability to seduce

(Clark 2003), in particular the right-wing of her party that had never been fully reconciled to the Butskellite consensus, and to appeal over the heads of ideologues of left and right to that constituency still referred to in Thatcherite terms as ordinary hard-working families. Both Thatcher and Mitterrand used the power of their charisma to gloss over their contradictions with regard to policies that were sometimes willed by them and that sometimes entailed consequences to which they were forced to submit, particularly concerning the ongoing process of convergence in Europe. Mrs Thatcher signed the Single European Act in 1986 in the hope that the U.K. would profit from a freer European market, but accepting that the institutions of Europe would determine the rules of its operation, with the inevitable implications for U.K. sovereignty. François Mitterrand was a great champion of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, hoping above all to bind a reunified and resurgent Germany inextricably into the European project and make the Franco-German couple unbreakable. But at the same time, the convergence criteria stipulated by the Treaty as a pre-requisite for member-states wishing to accede to monetary union, would militate against the kind of 'Europe sociale' the Socialists had envisaged during the early days of Mitterrand's first presidential mandate.

But whereas the charismatic power to seduce could mask the growing redundancy of the traditional ideological postures adopted by Mitterrand and Thatcher, their political heirs enjoy no such advantage. Thus David Cameron can style himself as the defender of national sovereignty and revive the Thatcherite fear of being 'swamped' by immigration (Schuster 2003, 141), by promising to bring it down to the tens of thousands (Cameron 2011). Yet this is done in the full knowledge that such an ambition is impossible, not least because immigration is supported by the corporate interests funding his party, and which benefit from having a global pool of surplus labour at their disposal. More ironical still, was the visit of the French Socialist Prime Minister to the City of London. In spite of his president's principal campaign plank of representing ordinary people and the pretensions of the former Industry Minister, Arnaud Montebourg, to tame the exploitative excesses of international capital, Manuel Valls came to declare emphatically to corporate investors and international financiers that: 'My government is pro-business!' (AFP 2014).

Convergence does not mean that there is no scope for significant national variations. There is a sound evidence base to suggest that tendencies assumed to be global can be of limited duration and do not preclude more specific influences from other sources (Castles 1998). But political actors like the ones mentioned above, whatever their ideological convictions, often have their freedom of action limited by comparable domestic needs and global realities and are obliged to operate within the parameters of what may be described as a constrained autonomy (Ohmae 1991). A final and cogent example of this is the fate that has befallen the steel industry in France and Britain. When François Hollande, as the Socialist presidential candidate, visited the steelworks belonging to Arcelor Mittal at Florange in February 2012, he promised that under his presidency a law would be passed preventing companies from closing down a factory when there were potential buyers. Barely more than a year later, the Socialist government had failed to prevail against the will of the multinational and its principal shareholder, Lakshmi Mittal, and the furnaces were extinguished. On 24 April 2013 the former workers inaugurated a granite plaque on the site engraved with the words: 'Ici reposent les promesses de changement de François Mitterrand faites aux ouvriers et à leurs familles le 24 février 2012' (Reuters 2013). In April 2016 a Conservative U.K. government, much inclined to criticise its French socialist counterpart, found that its enthusiasm for the free flow of capital could not prevent a foreign multinational from threatening to bring the mass production of steel in the U.K. to an end. In short, they were two ideologically opposed sets of political actors, equally limited in their ability to confront the same crisis of deindustrialisation and the imperatives of borderless capitalism.

Notes

1. There can be little doubt that a decision that would have such massive implications externally, was driven by Nixon's increasingly painful awareness of the internal consequences, electorally, of a poorly performing US economy. See May, Ann and Keller, Robert. 1991. 'Nixon's Political Business Cycle.' In Friedman, Leon and Levantrosser, William (eds). *Richard M. Nixon. Politician, President, Administrator*. Westport: Greenwood Press, pp. 222-38.
2. Žižek himself has faced criticism for the way his discursive mastery draws the reader in and masks its own operation in an ideological manner. See, for example, Ramadanovic, Petar. 2014. 'No Place like Ideology (On Slavoj Žižek): Is There a Difference Between the Theory of Ideology and the Theory of Interpretation?' *Cultural Critique*, vol. 86, pp. 119-138. Nonetheless, this apparent contradiction does not make Žižek's critique of globalism any less lucidly compelling.

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